Confucius – A Christian Perspective

Dr. Patrick Zukeran considers the teachings of the greatest Eastern philosopher from a Christian perspective, analyzing their commonalities and differences.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Life of Confucius

Born in 550 B.C., Confucius is considered the greatest of all Eastern philosophers. His teachings are foundational to Asian cultures. His writings, *The Five Classics,* a collection of ancient Chinese literature, and *The Four Books*, a collection of his and his disciples' teachings, were for centuries the standard curriculum for Chinese education.

Confucius' teachings and biography were written many years after his death and were edited by his disciples. Although historians present various accounts of his life, there are some basic facts about which we are reasonably sure. From these basic facts, it is possible to outline the major events of his life.

Confucius lived during the Chou Dynasty (1100 B.C. to 256 B.C.) He was born in northern China in the Lu province into a family of humble circumstances. His father died at a young age. Confucius began studying under the village tutor and, at the age of fifteen, devoted his life to study. He married at twenty but soon divorced his wife and had an aloof relationship with his son and daughter. In his twenties, he became a teacher and gathered a group of loyal disciples.

At this time, the land was divided among feudal lords. The moral and social order was in a state of decay. Confucius

sought a way to restore both cultural and political order. He believed that reform would be accomplished by educating the leaders in the classics and his philosophy. He therefore sought a political position of influence, from which he could implement his principles.

When Confucius was fifty years old, tradition teaches that the Duke of Lu appointed him to a cabinet position. Several historians believe he eventually ascended to higher positions of public office. Due to political disagreements and internal conflicts, he resigned his post at fifty-five and left the province of Lu. He then traveled from state to state for thirteen years, seeking to persuade political leaders to adopt his teachings. Although many lords respected him, no one gave him a position. Discouraged by the lack of response, he devoted his final years to teaching and writing. Before his death in 479 B.C., he expressed his discouragement and disillusionment regarding his career.

However, his disciples were able to gain significant positions in government after his death. They modified his teachings and added their own insights and centuries such that Confucianism later shaped Chinese culture by becoming the official religion of China. The values he espoused of education, family loyalty, work ethic, value of traditions, conformity to traditional standards, honoring of ancestors, and unquestioning obedience to superiors remain entrenched in Asian culture.

There is much to appreciate regarding the life and teachings of Confucius. Christians would agree with his philosophy of ethics, government responsibility, and social conduct on several points. These similarities provide bridges upon which we can build meaningful dialogue with those in East Asian Cultures. These values make East Asian people open to the message of Christ. Despite the similarities in ethics, there are some major differences between Christianity and Confucianism that are important to identify. This work will highlight these differences and provide ways we can

effectively share Christ with those in East Asian cultures.

The Metaphysics of Confucius

Confucianism, as its founder taught, is not a religion in the traditional sense; rather, it is an ethical code. Chinese culture was steeped in the religion of animism, a belief that gods and spirits dwelt in natural formations. Along with an animistic worldview, there was a belief in ancestor worship. The spirits of the dead needed to be honored and cared for by the living family members.

However, Confucius avoided spiritual issues in his teachings. Although he believed in spirits and the supernatural, he did not feel the need to devote extensive efforts in teaching about them. Rather, he was humanistic and rationalistic in his outlook. According to David Noss, author of *A History of the World's Religions*, Confucius' "position on matters of faith was this: whatever seemed contrary to common sense in popular tradition and whatever did not serve any discoverable social purpose, he regarded coldly."{1} The answer to the cultural and social problems was found in humanity itself, not in anything supernatural. This is further exhibited in the following three references:

1) A disciple of Confucius wrote, "The master never talked of prodigies, feats of strength, disorders or spirits"{2}

2) Confucius himself stated, "To devote oneself earnestly to one's duty to humanity, and while respecting the spirits, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom."{3}

3) In the Waley translation of the *Analects*, Confucius stated, "Our master's views concerning culture and the outward insignia of goodness, we are permitted to hear; but about man's nature and the ways of heaven, he will not tell us anything at all."{4}

In the Confucian system a divine being does not have a

significant role; his philosophy is man-centered and relies on self-effort. Man is sufficient to attain the ideal character through education, self-effort, and self-reflection. His system articulated the proper conduct in relationships, ceremony, and government. The core problem of mankind according to Confucius is that people are not educated and do not know how to conduct themselves properly in their societal roles. The chief goal of life is to become educated and live a moral life.

However, Confucius acknowledges a supreme power which established the moral order of the universe. This he refers to as the "Mandate of Heaven." The "Mandate of Heaven" may also refer to fate and events occurring in life which are beyond the control of the individual. The just rule and the virtuous man live in accord with this moral order. This is the moral order that lies behind the Confucian ethical system. One must be careful not to violate the will of heaven. Confucius wrote, "He who put himself in the wrong with Heaven has no means of expiation left."{5} Some scholars believe the uses of the term reveals that Confucius was referring at times to a supreme being.{6} After his death, Confucianism evolved, combining with Chinese traditional religions and Buddhism to add a spiritual component.

In contrast, Christianity is God-centered. It is built on a relationship with a personal God who is involved in the world. Confucius focused on life here on this earth. Jesus focused on life in eternity. For Jesus, what happens in eternity has ramifications for life here on earth. In Matthew 6:19 Jesus stated, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal." Here we see a contrast in the perspectives of Jesus and Confucius.

The Ethics of Confucius

Three key principles are emphasized in the teachings of Confucius: the principle of Li, the principle of Jen, and the principle of Chun-Tzu. The term Li has several meanings which are often translated as propriety, reverence, courtesy, ritual, or the ideal standard of conduct. It is what Confucius believed to be the ideal standard of religious, moral, and social conduct.

The second key concept is the principle of Jen. It is the fundamental virtue of Confucian teaching. Jen is the virtue of goodness and benevolence. It is expressed through recognition of value and concern in others regardless of their rank or class. In the *Analects*, Confucius summarizes the principle of Jen in this statement often called the silver rule: "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you."{7} Li provides the structure for social interaction; Jen makes it a moral system.

The third important concept is that of Chun-Tzu, the idea of the true gentleman. It is the man who lives by the highest ethical standards. The gentleman displays five virtues: self-respect, generosity, sincerity, persistence, and benevolence.{8} His relationships are described as follows: as a son he is always loyal, as a father he is just and kind, as an official he is loyal and faithful, as a husband he is righteous and just, and as a friend, he is faithful and tactful.{9} If all men lived by the principles of Li and Jen and strove to the character of the true gentlemen, justice, and harmony would rule the empire.

The Christian would find himself in agreement with many of Confucius' ethical principles and virtues. A Christian would also agree with many of the character qualities of the true gentleman and seek to develop those qualities.

What accounts for the similarity in ethics in Confucianism and

other religious systems is that which Paul states in Romans 2: within every man there exists a God-given conscience or natural law that guides our moral conduct. This is because we are created in the image of God, and thus we reflect His character. However, similarity in ethical codes does not mean the religions are the same.

The key difference can be identified by examining the silver rule of Confucius in contrast with the greatest commandment of Christ. Confucian law is summarized by the silver rule; however, Jesus summarizes his teachings this way: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:38.) Confucius believed that in order to truly achieve the principles of Li, Jen, and the character of the true gentleman, one must look within oneself. Jesus takes His teaching a step further. All His principles revolve first around a relationship with God. We only truly love our fellow man and live the righteous life God calls us to after our nature is transformed by the work of God's Holy Spirit which comes to indwell all who trust in Christ.

Nature of Man

The Confucian philosophy is built on the foundational belief in the goodness of human nature.{10} The *Analects* state, "The Master said, 'Is goodness indeed so far away? If we really wanted goodness, we should find that it was at our side.'"{11} He further taught that all individuals are capable of attaining the highest virtue. He stated, "Has anyone ever managed to do Good with his whole might even as long as the space of a single day? I think not. Yet I for my part have never seen anyone give up such an attempt because he had not the strength to go on."{12} In other words, all individuals are capable through self-effort to attain the ideal goodness.

Confucian disciple Mencius further develops this stating,

“Man’s nature is naturally good just as water naturally flows downward.”{13} This innate goodness can be developed and actualized through education, self-reflection, and discipline. Study in the six arts, which include ceremony, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics, develop one’s character.

However, despite man being naturally good, Confucius faced reality honestly. He questioned whether it was possible to ever truly attain to the level of the true gentleman. Confucius stated, “I for my part have never yet seen one who really cared for goodness, nor one who really abhorred wickedness.”{14} He said of himself, “As to being a divine sage or even a good man, far be it from me to make any such claim.”{15} He further stated, “The master said, the ways of the true gentleman are three. I myself have met with success in none of them.”{16} However, if man by nature is good, why can we not attain that which should be natural to us?

The Bible is built on a contrasting view of man. It teaches that man is created in the image of God and was thus originally good. However, because of the fall in Genesis 3, man is now sinful and in rebellion toward God. Therefore, his natural tendency is to disobey the commandments of God, and he is driven to please himself. Paul states in Romans 7:18, “I have the desire to do good, but I cannot carry it out.” As Confucius observed, no man is able to live up to the standards of the “True Gentleman” or God’s commands because man’s nature is sinful and in need of transformation.

According to the Bible, good education is a positive step toward helping man change, but it falls short. Man is in need of a heart transformation. Life transformation occurs when a person enters into a personal relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. One’s nature is transformed because God’s Spirit indwells an individual. Although the Christian is not capable of living out the principles of God’s law flawlessly, he is not left to live a holy life on his own

strength. God provides man the indwelling of His Holy Spirit to enable man to live in obedience to God's law.

Relationships

Central to Confucius' teaching are relationships and social roles. There are five great relationships.{17} If these attitudes are practiced, there will be harmony among all:

1. Kindness in the father and obedient devotion in the son

2. Gentility in the eldest brother and humility and respect in the younger

3. Righteous behavior in the husband and obedience in the wife

4. Humane consideration in elders and deference in juniors

5. Benevolence in rulers and loyalty of ministers and subjects

The most important relationship is the family as it is the basic unit of all humanity. Consistent with the pantheistic world view, he did not believe in an individual self or soul. Rather, roles and relationships define a person. The goal of living is to achieve harmony by acting appropriately within those roles and relationships because the harmony of relationships within the family can extend into the life of the community and the world. The way individuals relate to their family members influences how they treat members of the community. This, in turn, affects relationships beyond the community. Thus, harmonious family relationships lead to harmonious relationships in the community. If there is discord in the family, this will likewise carry over into the community.

In the family unit, the father is the key figure. He must be a good example to his sons. It is the son's duty to obey without questioning and honor his father even after his father's death. When the father dies, obedience is then given to the

oldest brother. Confucius stated, “Meng I Tzu asked about the treatment of parents. The Master said, ‘Never disobey! . . . While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual.’”{18}

Confucius taught that government should be for the people. Feudal lords are to be responsive to the needs of the people they govern. If the rulers lived by the highest principles, the people would then follow, and there would be reform from the greatest to the least. The duty of those in subordinate positions is to be unquestioningly loyal to their superior. Confucius stated, “It is said that if good people work for a country for a hundred years, it is possible to overcome violence and eliminate killing. This saying is indeed true.”{19} Confucius believed that a good society would be achieved through education.

There are points of agreement between Confucius and the Bible. Confucius believed the virtues he espoused are lived out in relationships. The same is true for Christianity; our relationship with God is reflected in our relationships with one another. The truth of the Christian life is lived out in a community, not in isolation. The family is the key social unit, and the father is the leader of the family. However, Christianity takes relationships one step further than Confucius. Not only can we have the five relationships espoused by Confucius, we can also have a personal relationship with God. It is from this connection that our earthly relationships find their greatest meaning.

A Final Critique

There is much in the teachings of Confucius that I have found commendable. His moral values often parallel those taught in the Bible. As previously mentioned, the Bible teaches that we are created in the image of God, and, therefore, we reflect His moral character. His moral law code is embedded on our

hearts (Rom. 2). Most people of Asian descent may not be strict adherents to Confucianism, but they are all influenced by his philosophy. Anyone seeking to serve in Asian cultures would find it worthwhile to read his works. Confucianism is very adaptable and fluid in its structure. That has been a weakness, but it has also a strength of the system since it allows Confucianism to join other inclusive religious systems. There are several significant differences, and, I believe, deficiencies within Confucian philosophy.

First, Confucianism falls short as a comprehensive life view because it fails to address several key issues. The Confucian system does not answer the key questions such as, Why does the universe exist? How do we explain its origin? What is the meaning of mankind's existence in the universe? What happens after death? These are universal questions that must be addressed. Man is a spiritual being, and this philosophy leaves one spiritually void. The Bible teaches that God has set eternity in the heart of men (Eccl. 3:11.) The longing for spiritual answers is a universal need. For this reason, Confucian philosophy eventually combined with Chinese Folk religion and Buddhism. Nonetheless, it still fails to provide complete answers.

Second, Confucius taught there was an overarching morality and will called the "Mandate of Heaven" which guided the universe. The Mandate of Heaven is the moral order established by heaven. Some believe Confucius was referring to an impersonal force; others believe he was referring to a personal being. In either case, Confucius felt the heavens (or the one in heaven) do not communicate with people. Confucius stated, "Heaven does not speak; yet the four seasons run their course thereby, the hundred creatures, each after its kind, are born thereby. Heaven does no speaking!"{20} in contrast, the Bible teaches that we can have a relationship with the one who established the moral order. God is involved with creation and has made the way for a relationship with Him possible through His son

(Jn. 3:16). The creator of all things has communicated with us through His Word and His Son. He also invites us to commune with Him in prayer and intimate fellowship. The imagery of the Shepherd and His sheep found in Psalm 23 and John 10 reflect His desire for a close relationship with us.

Third, Confucius built his philosophy on the belief that man is basically good. However, despite this, Confucius honestly admitted that no one had attained the level of the true gentleman. Confucius stated, "I for my part have never yet seen one who really cared for goodness, nor one who really abhorred wickedness."{21} He said of himself, "…the Ways of the true gentleman are three. I myself have met with success in none of them."{22} If man is good by nature, we must ask why we cannot attain what should be natural to us.

The Bible is built on a contrasting view of man. It teaches that man is created in the image of God but fallen in sin and rebellious toward God. Therefore, his natural tendency is to disobey the commandments of God and please himself. Paul states in Romans 7:18, "I have the desire to do good, but I cannot carry it out." Good education is a positive step toward helping man change, but it falls short. Man is in need of a heart transformation. Life transformation occurs when a person enters into a personal relationship with God and God's Spirit transforms one's nature through the indwelling and enabling power of His Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Confucius teaches many valuable ethical principles that are consistent with Biblical teaching. This offers Christians a good way to build bridges with many in East Asian cultures. However, the spiritual void in Confucianism is a great weakness; however, it provides a wonderful opportunity to present the case for Christianity.

Christianity offers a comprehensive life view, for it explains

the nature of God, our relationship to Him, the origin of creation, and what happens after death. In Confucian teaching, one cannot communicate with the creator, but in Christianity, the Creator invites us and makes the way possible for a relationship with Him through His Son Jesus. Finally, true transformation of one's nature will not occur through education, but rather through the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer in Christ.

Notes

1. David Noss, *A History of the World's Religions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), 298.

2. *Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 7:20.

3. *Analects* 6:20

4. *Analects* 5:12

5. *Analects* 3:13.

6. Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Volume 1 (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 57-8.

7. *Analects* 15:23.

8. *Analects* 17:6.

9. Noss, 297.

10. Stephen Schuhmacher & Gert Woerner, *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1994), 80.

11. *Analects* 7:9.

12. *Analects* 4:6.

13. Mencius XI:2, trans. David Hinton, (Washington D.C.:

Counterpoint, 1998), 197.

14. *Analects* 4:6

15. *Analects* 7:33.

16. *Analects* 14:30.

17. Noss, 293.

18. *Analects* 2:5.

19. *Analects* 13:11.

20. *Analects* 17:19.

22. *Analects* 4:6.

22. *Analects* 14:30.

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Advocacy Apologetics: Finding Common Ground as a Way to the Gospel

As you examine your life, can you think of any lessons you wish you had learned earlier than you did?

I'm really glad I learned *this* lesson very early in my career as a Christian communicator. It's made a world of difference.

God has graciously sent me presenting Christ and biblical truth on six continents before university students and professors, on mainstream TV and radio talk shows, with executives, diplomats and professional athletes.

He’s put me speaking in university classrooms and auditoriums, in embassies, boardrooms, and locker rooms. He’s had me writing for mainstream newspapers, magazines, and on the Internet about controversial subjects like sex, abortion, the afterlife, and reasons for faith.

As you might imagine, I’ve encountered many skeptics and objections to faith. I’ve learned much from my critics, the unpaid guardians of my soul.

But if I hadn’t learned this crucial lesson at the outset, would all those outreach doors have opened?

The Lesson

I learned it on an island in a river in Seoul, Korea. Over a million believers were gathered for Explo 74. One speaker that day was a prominent church leader from India who discussed how to best communicate the message of Jesus to the types of Buddhists in India. Here’s my paraphrase of his advice.

We could use two methods, he said. One was to begin by stressing the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. But that often gets people mad and turns them off.

A second way involved agreeing with the Buddhist where we could. We could say something like this: “I know that you as a Buddhist believe in Four Noble Truths.” (This is foundational to many strains of Buddhism.) “First you believe suffering is universal. As a follower of Jesus, I also believe suffering is everywhere. It needs a solution.

Second, you believe that suffering is caused by evil desire or craving. I believe something very similar; I call this evil desire sin.”

Third, you believe that the way to eliminate suffering is to eliminate craving. I feel selfishness needs to be eliminated, too. And fourth, you feel we eliminate craving by following

the Eightfold Path: right understanding, right aspiration, right behavior, etc.

Here's where I would suggest an alternative. For many years I, too, tried to eliminate my selfishness by seeking to think and do the right thing. But you know what happened? I became very frustrated because I lacked the power to do it. I realized that if I relied on God, He could give me the inner power I needed."

Do you see the contrast between those two methods of approaching someone who differs with you? The first emphasizes differences and has the emotional effect of holding up your hands as if to say "Stop!" or "Go away!" The second begins by agreeing where you can. Your emotional hands are extended as if to welcome your listeners. If you were the listener, which approach would you prefer?

Start by Agreeing where You Can

In communicating with skeptics, start by agreeing where you can. You'll get many more to listen.

I call this approach Advocacy Apologetics. You're approaching the person as an advocate rather than an adversary. You believe in some of the same things they do. Expressing agreement can penetrate emotional barriers and communicate that you are *for* that person rather than *against* them. It can make them more willing to consider areas of disagreement.

Don't compromise biblical truth; but agree at the start where you can.

Paul used this approach. He wrote (1 Corinthians. 9:19-23 NLT, emphasis mine):

> *I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Gentiles*

> *who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can.*

> *Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. I do all this to spread the Good News.*

Here’s an experiment: The next time you encounter someone who differs with you, take a deep breath. Pray. Ask God to help you identify three areas of agreement. Can’t find three? How about one? Discuss that first. Become an advocate for them. Maybe you’ll oil some stuck emotional and intellectual gears and nudge someone in His direction.

“It’s Unfair for God to Put Children in Muslim Families”

If salvation is free for anyone who receives Jesus Christ as his personal saviour, then how about a child who is born into a Muslim family. He or she will not have a chance to receive salvation because of the traditional faith from their parents. So it is not fair for God to put this child in the Muslim family.

The timing of your question is one of those “God things” that make me smile. I was ready to reply with what I know to be true, that God is bigger than and not limited by the circumstances of someone’s birth, when I had the pleasure of sitting down to talk with a man who grew up in Iran, the son of devout Muslim parents, but who became a Christian. Let me tell you his story.

Ibrahim (not his real name) was very depressed, assaulted by what he calls “evil thoughts” pushing suicide as his solution. One night he lay in his bed, looking at the ceiling and said to God, “What have I done to You? I’ve lost my wife, my children, my business, my fortune. I’ve lost everything. What did I ever do to You to deserve this mistreatment?”

Immediately, he heard God’s voice inside his head: “Don’t you see? I rescued you from that woman. She was trying to take your life.” (And indeed, he found out later that this same woman, before taking him to the cleaners, had poisoned her first husband.)

Ibrahim knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had heard from God, and he sat bolt upright in bed, swinging his legs onto the floor. At that moment, a single drop of sweat trickled from the back of his neck down his spine, and as it traveled down his back he felt all the energy and power drain out of him. He was a limp dish rag, unable to stand, much less walk or do anything else. He was suddenly aware that he was physically as powerless and needy as he was spiritually.

He prayed, “I need help! Send me angels!”

Within days, as an answer to his prayer, he met a Christian woman who befriended him and shared her faith with him. She basically tutored him in Christianity, explaining that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross for Ibrahim’s sins and was raised from the dead three days later.

One night, he had a dream. He was standing in a room with several other people when Jesus walked in and stood about 12 feet away from him, radiating strength and love and acceptance. Ibrahim was so excited! He said, “Jesus! What are You doing here?” and Jesus said, “I came to talk to you.” All Ibrahim could think about—in his dream—was that he wanted Jesus to hug him. So he asked Jesus if he could hold Him and hug Him, but Jesus disappeared. . . and Ibrahim woke up.

The moment he awakened, he knew he was washed. He opened his heart to Jesus and became a Christian. He told all his friends of his experience, and they laughed derisively at him. But the reality that he had met Jesus and had become a new man—"a new, *joyful* man," he told me—was so much stronger than his friends' ridicule that it truly didn't matter to him.

Ibrahim delighted to tell me the differences between Christianity and Islam, how Islam is a "religion of the sword," full of force and fear, but Christianity is a religion of relationship, of receiving and returning God's love and delight. He loves the freedom that we have as Christians, freedom to make choices that are absent in Islam. He loves how Jesus has changed his heart, enabling him to forgive the people who hurt him deeply and love the people God brings across his path.

This is an illustration of how and why a child who grows up in a Muslim home is not hopeless. God tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that He has planted eternity in our hearts, and in Romans 1:19-20 He tells us that men are without excuse because He has given us clear evidence of Himself, both within ourselves (per Ecclesiastes) and in His creation.

So people are aware that there is a God to whom we are all accountable, and that God reveals Himself to people directly, through His children, and through His word.

In the Muslim world, we're hearing more and more stories of people coming to faith in Jesus through dreams and visions. Praise God!

Sue Bohlin

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Charity and Compassion: Christianity Is Good for Culture

Byron Barlowe looks at the impact of Christianity on the world. He concludes that applying a Christian, biblical worldview to the issues that we face in our world has resulted in a great amount of good. Apart from the eternal aspect of Christianity, people applying Christian principles to worldly issues have benefited all mankind.

Christian Religion: Good or Bad for Mankind?

Standing on the jetway boarding a flight out of Cuzco, Peru, I overheard an American college student say to his companion, "See that older guy up there? He's a professor. Came here to give lectures on Christianity. Can you believe that?" In an apparent reference to abuses perpetrated on local Indians by the *conquistadors* centuries earlier, he added, "Haven't Christians done enough to these people?"

He didn't know that I was the professor's companion. Turning around, I said, "Excuse me, I couldn't help but overhear. I'm with the professor and, yes, we were giving lectures at the university from a Christian worldview. But did you know that all these people in between us were helping with humanitarian aid in the poorest villages around here all week?"

He sheepishly mumbled something about every story having two sides. But his meaning was clear: what good could possibly come from Christians imposing their beliefs on these indigenous people? Their culture was ruined by their kind and should be left alone. Popular sentiments, but are they fair and accurate?

The church—and those acting in its name—has had its moments of injustice, intrigue, even murder. Unbiblical excesses during the Inquisitions, the Crusades, and other episodes are undeniable. Yet these deviations from the teachings of Christ and the Bible are overwhelmingly countered by the church's good works and novel institutions of care, compassion, and justice.

Carlton Hayes wrote, "From the wellspring of Christian compassion, our Western civilization has drawn its inspiration, and its sense of duty, for feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, looking after the homeless, clothing the naked, tending the sick and visiting the prisoner." As one writer put it, missionaries and other Christians lived as if people mattered.{1} Revolutionary!

Christianity exploded onto a brutal, heartless Greco-Roman culture. Believers in this radical new religion set a new standard for caring for the ill, downtrodden, and abused, even at risk of death. Through their transformed Christlike outlooks, they established countercultural ways that lead to later innovations: orphanages, hospitals, transcendent art and architecture, and systems of law and order based on fairness, to name a few. In the early church, every congregation had a list of needy recipients called a *matriculum*. Enormous amounts of charity were given.{2} "Pagan society, through its excesses, teetered on the brink of extinction. Christianity, however, represented . . . a new way."{3}

Compassion and charity are biblical ideals. "Early Christians set a model for their descendents to follow, a model that today's modern secular societies try to imitate, but without Christian motivation."{4} We take for granted the notion that it's good to help the needy and oppressed, but wherever it's found, whether in religious or secular circles, it can be traced right back to Jesus Christ and His followers.

Answering Atheists: Is Religion Evil?

"Religion poisons everything," carps militant atheist Christopher Hitchens. Fellow atheist Richard Dawkins claims that "there's not the slightest evidence that religious people . . . are any more moral than non-religious people." True? Not according to social scientists from Princeton and other top universities.

As citizens, religious people generally shine. According to Logan Paul Gage, "for every 100 altruistic acts—like giving blood—performed by non-religious people, the religious perform 144." Also, those active in religion in the U.S. volunteer in their communities more.{5} A Barna study reports that "more than four out of five (83%) gave at least $1000 to churches and non-profit entities during 2007, far surpassing . . . any other population segment studied…."{6} This echoes studies from the past few decades.

Furthermore, studies show that religious youth have more self-control against cigarettes, alchohol and marijuana. "Religion also correlates with fewer violent crimes, school suspensions and a host of other negative behaviors."{7}

It appears that Dawkins is very wrong. He lamented that "faith is . . . comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate." People who care about our culture will hope he's right about how hard religion is to eliminate, especially Christianity.{8}

So, what about the evil perpetrated by the church? Early Christians were admirable in their display of compassion and charity. But haven't the centuries since witnessed a parade of continual religious wars (including "Christian wars), persecutions, and mayhem? Among Christianity's sins: forced conversions, expansion by so-called "Christian states" mingled with genocide, execution of accused heretics and witches, and the ever infamous Crusades. Regrettable, inexcusable, but

largely overblown.

Dinesh D'Souza writes that this popular refrain also "greatly exaggerates [crimes of] religious fanatics while neglecting or rationalizing the vastly greater crimes committed by secular and atheist fanatics."{9} Historian Jonathan Riley-Smith disputes that the Crusaders were rapists and murderers. He and other historians document that they were pilgrims using their own funds to liberate long-held Christian lands and defend Europe against Muslim invaders.{10}

What about heretics who were burned at the stake? Author Henry Kamen claims that "much of the modern stereotype of the Inquisition is essentially made up. . . . Inquisition trials . . . were fairer and more lenient than their secular counterparts."{11}

Atheism is associated with far more death and destruction than religion is, particularly Christianity. In *Death by Government*, R.J. Rummel writes "Almost 170 million men, women and children have been shot, beaten, tortured, knifed, burned, starved, frozen, crushed or worked to death; buried alive, drowned, hung, bombed or killed in any other of a myriad of ways governments have inflicted death on unarmed, helpless citizens and foreigners."{12} Rummel directly attributes eighty-four percent of these to atheistic "megamurderers" like Stalin, Hitler, and Mao.

For perspective, consider that "the Crusades, Inquisition and the witch burnings killed approximately 200,000 people" over five hundred years. These deaths, tragic and unjust as many were, only comprise one percent of the deaths caused by atheist regimes during a few decades. That's a ninety-nine to one ratio of death tied directly to the atheist worldview.{13}

History shows that atheism, not Christianity, is the view that is bad—even murderous—for society.

Compassion: Christian Innovation in a Cruel World

Christianity is unique. No other religion or philosophy values *and practices wholesale* taking care of the young, sick, orphaned, oppressed, and widowed, hands-on and sacrificially.

To ancient Greeks and Romans, life was cheap. Infanticide—baby killing— was "condoned and practiced for centuries without guilt or remorse [and] extolled by Greco-Roman mythologies." This ungodly practice was opposed by Christians, whose compassionate example eventually caused Roman emperors to outlaw it.{14} First-century art shows believers rescuing unwanted Roman babies from the Tiber River. They raised them as their own.

Emperors pronounced death sentences on a whim, even beyond gladiatorial games. This was the ultimate extension of *paterfamilias*: a father had the right to kill his own child if she displeased him. Life was expendable, even among families!{15}

Abortion, human sacrifice, and suicide were also part of societies unaffected by God's love.How different from the scriptural doctrine that all are made in God's image and deserve life and dignity.

Slaves and the poor were on their own. One exhaustive survey of historical documents "found that antiquity has left no trace of organized charitable effort."{16}

The ancient code was: "leave the ill to die." Roman colonists in Alexandria even left their friends and next of kin behind during a plague.{17} Japanese holy men kept the wealthy from relieving the poor because they believed them to be "odious to the gods."{18}

By contrast, Jesus expanded the Jewish obligation of

compassion well beyond family and tribe even to enemies. His parable of the Good Samaritan exploded racial and social boundaries.{19} Scripture says that Jesus "had compassion on them and healed their sick." Christ's disciples went around healing and teaching as their master had. Believers were instructed to care for widows, the sick, the disabled and the poor, and also for orphans. "Justin Martyr, an early defender of Christianity, reveals that collections were taken during church services to help the orphans," writes Alvin Schmidt. By the time of Justinian, churches were operating old folks' homes called *gerontocomia*. Before Christianity, homes for the aged didn't exist. Now, such nursing homes are taken for granted.{20}

Schmidt notes that "Christianity filled the pagan void that largely ignored the sick and dying, especially during pestilences." Greeks had diagnostic centers, but no nursing care. Roman hospitals were only for slaves, gladiators, and occasionally for soldiers. Christians provided shelters for the poor and pilgrims, along with medical care. Christian hospitals were the first voluntary charitable institutions.{21}

A pagan Roman soldier in Constantine's army was intrigued by Christians who "brought food to his fellow soldiers who were afflicted with famine and disease." He studied this inspiring group who displayed such humanity and was converted to the faith. He represents much of why the early church grew despite bouts of severe persecution.{22}

Basic beliefs—or worldviews—lead to basic responses. The Christian response to life and suffering changed the world for good.

Early Church Charity vs. Self-Serving

Greco-Roman Giving

In ancient Greece and Rome, charity was unknown, except for gaining favors and fame. This stood in stark contrast to Jesus' thinking. He rebuked the Pharisees, whose good deeds were done for public acclaim. Christ's ethic of sharing with any and all and helping the underprivileged brought a revolution that eventually converted the entire Roman Empire.

Caritas, root word of *charity*, "meant giving to relieve economic or physical distress without expecting anything in return," writes Schmidt, "whereas *liberalitas* meant giving to please the recipient, who later would bestow a favor on the giver."{23} Pagans almost never gave out of what we today would ironically call true *liberality*.

In contrast, for Christ-followers part of worship was hands-on charity. They celebrated God's redemption this way, giving and serving both individually and corporately. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem in the fifth century, sold church ornaments to feed the poor. (Another contrast: the Hindu worldview assumes that neediness results from bad deeds in a past life.)

Ancient culture was centered on elitism. The well-off and privileged gave not out of any sense of caring, but out of what Aristotle termed "liberality, in order to demonstrate [their] magnanimity and even superiority." They funded parks, statues, and public baths with their names emblazoned on them. Even the little philanthropy the ancients did was seldom received by the needy. Those who could pay back in some way received it.{24}

Historian Kenneth Scott Latourette noted that early Christians *innovated* five ways in their use of their own funds for the general welfare:

First, those who joined were *expected to give* to their ability level, both rich and poor. Christ even called some to give all

they had to the poor. St. Francis of Assissi, Pope Gregory the Great, and missionary C.T. Studd all did as well.

Second, they had a *new motivation*: the love for and example of Christ, who being rich became poor for others' sakes (2 Corinthians 8:9).{25}

Third, Christianity like Judaism, created *new objects of giving*: widows, orphans, slaves, the persecuted.

The fourth Christian innovation was *personalized giving*, although large groups were served. Also, *individuals* did the giving, not the government. "For the most part, the few Roman acts of relief and assistance were isolated state activities, 'dictated much more by policy than by benevolence'."{26}

Last, Christian generosity was not solely for insiders.{27} This was truly radical. The emperor known as Julian the Apostate complained that since Jews never had to beg and Christians supported both their own poor and those outside the church, "those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render to them."{28}

Believers sometimes fasted for charity. The vision was big: ten thousand Christians skipping one hundred days' meals could provide a million meals, it was figured. Transformed hearts and minds imitated the God who left the throne of heaven to serve and die for others.{29}

Even W.E. Lecky, no friend to Christianity, wrote, "The active, habitual, and detailed charity of private persons, which is such a conspicuous feature in all Christian societies, was scarcely known in antiquity."{30} That is, until Christians showed up.

Medieval and Modern Manifestations

This way of thinking and living continued in Medieval times.

Third century deacon St. Laurence was ordered by a Roman offiical to bring some of the treasures of the church. He showed up with poor and lame church members. For this affront to Roman sensibilities, he was roasted to death on a gridiron. Today, a Florida homeless shelter named after St. Laurence provides job help and basic assistance to the downtroden.

The Generous Middle Ages

The Middle Ages saw Christian compassion grow. In the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, Italian clergy "zealously defended widows and orphans."{31} Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester in the tenth century "sold all of the gold and silver vessels of his cathedral to relieve the poor who were starving during a famine."{32}

Furthermore, according to Will Durant,

> *The administration of charity reached new heights in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. . . . The Church shared in relieving the unfortunate. Almsgiving was universal. Men hopeful of paradise left charitable bequests. . . . Doles of food were distributed [three times a week] to all who asked. . . . In one aspect the Church was a continent-wide organization for charitable aid.{33}*

From Hospitals to the Red Cross

Christian hospitals spread to Europe by the eighth century. By the mid-1500s, thirty-seven thousand Benedictine monasteries cared for the ill. Arab Muslims even followed suit. Christianity was changing the world, even beyond the West.

The much-maligned Crusaders founded healthcare orders, helping Muslims *and* Christians. This led to the establishment of insane asylums. By the 1400s, hospitals across Europe were under the direction of Christian bishops who often gave their own money. They cared for the poor and orphans and

occasionally fed prisoners—an all-purpose institution of care.

"Christian aid to the poor did not end with the early church or the Middle Ages," says Schmidt.{34} By the latter years of the nineteenth century, local Christian churches and denominations built many hospitals.

Medical nursing, a Christian innovation in ancient times, took leaps forward through the influence of Christ-follower Florence Nightingale. In 1864, Red Cross founder Jean Henri Dunant confessed on his deathbed, "I am a disciple of Christ as in the first century, and nothing more."{35}

Child Labor Laws

The Industrial Revolution in England ushered in a shameful exploitation of children, even among those naming the Christian faith. Kids as young as seven worked in horrible conditions in coal mines and chimneys.

Compassionate believers like William Wilberforce and Charles Dickens rallied their callous countrymen to pass Parliamentary laws against the worst child labor. The real superman of this cause was Lord Shaftesbury, whose years of tireless "pleadings, countless speeches, personal sacrifices and dogged persistence" resulted in "a number of bills that vastly improved child labor conditions." His firm faith in Christ spurred him and a nation on to true compassion.{36} This had a ripple effect across Western nations. Child labor has been outlawed in the West but continues strongly in nations less affected by Christian culture.

And Still Today . . .

This attitude of charity and compassion continues today in Christian societies like the Salvation Army and Christian groups who aided Hurricane Katrina victims so much better than the government.{37} Many more can be named. As someone said, "'Christian ideals have permeated society until non-

Christians, who claim to live a "decent life" without religion, have forgotten the origin of the very content and context of their "decency"."{38}

Notes

1. Alvin J. Schmidt, H*ow Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004) 147-148.
2. Ibid, 127.
3. Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Nashville: Word/Thomas Nelson, 1995) 40.
4. Schmidt, pg. 148.
5. Logan Paul Gage, *Touchstone*, January/February 2008.
6. "New Study Shows Trends in Tithing and Donating," Barna Research Group, April 14, 2008, www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrowPreview&BarnaUpdateID=296.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2007), 204.
10. Ibid, 205.
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12. R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (Transaction Publishers, 1994), quoted in *The Truth Project* DVD-based curriculum, Focus on the Family, 2006.
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16. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994) 29.
17. Schmidt, 129.
18. Schmidt, 131.
19. Christopher Price, "Pagans, Christianity, and Charity," CADRE (Christian Colligation of Apologetics Debate Research & Evangelism), www.christiancadre.org/member_contrib/cp_charity.html.

20 Schmidt, 136.
21. Schmidt, 155-157.
22. Schmidt, 130.
23. Schmidt, 126.
24. D'Souza, 64.
25. 2 Corinthians 8:9.
26. Lecky, quoted in Schmidt, 128.
27. Kennedy and Newcombe, 30.
28. Shelley, 36.
29. Schmidt, 126.
30. Quoted in Kennedy and Newcombe, 32.
31. Schmidt, 131-134.
32. Schmidt, 126.
33. Will Durant, *The Age of Faith*, 31, quoted by Christopher Price: www.christiancadre.org/member_contrib/cp_charity.html.
34. Schmidt. 137.
35. Schmidt, 155-166.
36. Schmidt, 143.
37. Schmidt, 142-144.
38. Schmidt, 131.

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"How Does Pantheism View Good and Evil?"

I found your website very helpful in offering information on yoga and Christianity, especially Michael Gleghorn's article.

I came across a quote for a guru:

> ***Life has a bright side and a dark side, for the world of relativity is composed of light and shadows. If you permit***

> *your thoughts to dwell on evil, you yourself will become ugly. Look only for the good in everything so you absorb the quality of beauty.*

Can you comment on how pantheism views evil and good? If you can shed some light on this quote, it would be helpful for me to understand how to address this with someone with this belief system.

Hello _____,

Thanks for your letter. Pantheism ultimately makes no distinction between good and evil. If all is one, and all is "God" (or Brahman), then the distinction between good and evil must ultimately be illusory. If not, then evil infects the very being of "God" itself. Thus, pantheism has a real problem with evil.

Of course, there is much truth in the guru's quote (although it's not terribly consistent with pantheism). However, one can find preferable advice (in my opinion) in the Bible. As Paul told the Philippians, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirableif anything is excellent or praiseworthythink about such things" (Philippians 4:8).

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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“You Got Christian Science Wrong”

I have read your thoughts about the religion Christian Science. Although you have researched the religion quite well it seems, to me, that your interpretation is wrong.

Christian Science is a religion based out of love for the lord God. Just like other Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religions.

What does the fine detail of those religions matter if they are based on the teachings of God. What does it matter how they choose to praise God and live the life they think they should. As long as it does not harm any person, and as I speak for my religion, Christian Science, it certainly does not.

I follow the teaching of Jesus Christ. I live my life for God each day. Who are you to judge the religion in which I choose to believe in? Jesus teaches us to follow the Lord and live our life in his Love. Christian Science has taught me to follow the Lord and live my life in his Love. Christian Science is about understanding that God has made you in his image and likeness (as it says in the bible).

I believe that everyone is entitled to an opinon, but I believe your writtings to be criticizing the lives of others, in which only God can judge.

Our analysis of Christian Science isn’t about criticizing the lives of others. It is about criticizing the LIES which are manifested in this particular set of teachings. Christian Science is based on the non-biblical worldview of Gnosticism, not the teachings of God revealed in the Bible. Your experience with it may be different from what you read in our article, but we analyze the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, not individuals’ experiences.

The “fine detail” of different religions is what determines what is true and what is false. Our eternity depends on what we believe; if we put our trust in what is false, we will remain alienated from God forever. I respectfully suggest you listen closely to what is said at your church about sin and what to do with the sin problem that separates us from God. If what is taught differs from what God has clearly said in His word—that the only solution to sin is to trust in Jesus’ death on the cross which paid for that sin—then it is not true and is giving people hope that is groundless. That is very dangerous.

Thank you for writing. I send this with a prayer that, because you truly seek to know God, He will show you what is true and what isn’t. You say you follow the teaching of Jesus. But He didn’t say to follow His teachings. He said to follow HIM. He said He was the way, the truth and the life, not the way-shower. The epistles explain that Jesus actually lives inside the Christ-follower who has put his trust in the crucified, risen Lord. Then Jesus Christ lives His life through us, the way light shines through a window. That is very different from any other religion—including Christian Science. I pray your eyes will be opened and you will see what’s true. I am so glad you wrote.

Sue Bohlin

Posted 2008

Can Western-style Education

Transform the Middle East?

Dear Probe reader,

A highlight of my recent tour of Jordan—a land teeming with biblical history—was visiting King's Academy. Jordan's new prep school emphasizes critical thinking over rote learning, teaching students not *what* to think but *how* to think. Could it become a model to train a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders to shake hands with each other and the West?

As you analyze your world through biblical lenses, it's important to be aware of significant global developments. King's Academy has garnered considerable attention among US and international media:

> *"Rather revolutionary" (TIME)*
>
> *"What could be more important in the Middle East than educating open-minded future leaders?" (The Sunday Times [London] op-ed)*
>
> *"Bringing the best of western education to the Middle East." (NPR)*
>
> *"There is a crisis in Arab education. This school [is] about the future—trying to pull an education system into the 21st Century—to build bridges between clashing cultures." (CBS-TV News)*

Biblical worldview, of course, promotes careful, critical thinking. Many westerners are unaware of how lack of critical thinking permeates Middle Eastern education and, hence, influences international relations. This piece aims to expand readers' geopolitical understanding. And, alas, too many western readers lack critical thinking themselves, so this uses current news to help focus attention on that biblical

value, a crucial one if we are to communicate cross culturally.

As are most of my shorter articles on the Probe Ministries website, this is an op-ed written for secular newspapers. I'm honored that you might read it and hope you find it useful.

Warm regards,

Rusty Wright

If you only learn to repeat what you've been taught—and not to think for yourself—you may be ill prepared to vote.

That's the lesson the Jerusalem-born librarian conveyed as we sat in her office in a brand new boarding school near Madaba, Jordan. When Afaf Kazimi moved to Jordan many years ago and could vote for the first time, she simply cast her ballot on another's recommendation without knowing much about the candidate. I voted for the wrong person, she concluded in hindsight.

Much of her early school education had involved rote memorization—learning facts for tests, as is common in the Middle East—and had lacked training in critical thinking, skills she developed later. Now she's excited to be part of a new experiment that blends Western analytical emphases with traditional Arab culture, helping students avoid the educational path she and others had to take.

Arab Preppies

Jordan's King's Academy opened in 2007 with goals of helping students from many nations and different religious backgrounds learn not *what* to think but *how* to think. Patterned after Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, King Abdullah's alma mater, King's looks much like a New England prep school. Think *Dead Poets Society* or *The Emperors Club*, coed and transplanted

to a desert oasis.

Students wear preppie blue blazers and ties, khaki trousers. Many live in dormitories, with faculty house parents. They have service responsibilities in the dining hall and community.

Sports aim to cultivate teamwork and discipline. An honor code is being developed. Course offerings involve the humanities, social sciences and hard sciences and include studies in Islam, Christianity, world religions, communication, rhetoric and ethics. Financial aid aims for socioeconomic diversity. Courses are taught in English and Arabic.

King Abdulla's Deerfield experience was formative in his young life. It developed lasting relationships. He's a friend of the West. Jordan has led efforts to renounce religious extremism and help religions coexist peacefully. King's Academy hopes its multinational faculty will train future leaders for the Middle East and beyond.

Critical Thinking

Since I attended Choate, Deerfield's peer (and, my classmates would want me to emphasize, chief rival), I'm especially interested in this Jordanian experiment. I'm grateful that I learned early to think critically and to ask lots of questions. King's appears eager to cultivate inquisitive minds.

A poster of William Shakespeare hung in the King's library along with promotion for J.R.R. Tolkien and the *International Herald Tribune*. Broad reading—especially of writers with whom you disagree—can facilitate learning and enhance communication. Intelligent people are always ready to learn, affirms an ancient proverb. Their ears are open for knowledge (Proverbs 18:15 NLT). How much better to get wisdom than gold, and good judgment than silver! claims another (Proverbs 16:16

NLT).

Logical, analytical thinking is, of course, crucial for healthy societies. Sloppy logic can be amusing or devastating: All fish swim. I swim. Therefore, I am a fish. Somewhat similar illogic appears in numerous aberrations: Muslim extremists threaten Western society. Omar is a Muslim. So Omar is a threat to me. Or, American foreign policy undermines my country. You're an American. Thus, you're my enemy. Shallow thinkers can turn illogic into dogma and breed fanaticism.

Of course, no school will produce perfect students. George W. Bush's critics might sometimes wonder if his Andover education taught him to think clearly. And if Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had attended Andover, would he and Bush get along? Well, maybe. But please, dont expect miracles.

King Abdullah's promising educational venture deserves close scrutiny. Could it become a model to train a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders to shake hands with each other and the West?

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"Is Pole-Dancing for Exercise Okay for Believers?"

Does Probe Ministries have anything in writing about not doing "pole dancing" like strippers do? A friend wants to do this (just for exercise, she says) but like yoga, I think this is something that is far from Christianity. She refuses to believe it's anything other than "just exercise" but the whole format is sexual. Please help?

Great question! Let's think about what the purpose of pole dancing is: pure eroticism. The point of it is to arouse the watcher. If anyone pole dances alone, I would think, it would be in preparation for doing it for an audience, right?

So is there any scenario in which that is acceptable? Absolutely! By a wife, for her husband, in total privacy. There is a biblical precedent for erotic dance of a wife for her husband in Song of Solomon 6. The privacy of a married couple is also, by the way, the only appropriate place for sexy behavior and clothing that would be immodest if worn out in public or for anyone elses eyes.

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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Shalom in Christ,
Michael Gleghorn

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Christianity: The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Women

Sue Bohlin examines the facts to show us that a Christian, biblical worldview of women lifted them from a status equivalent to dogs to a position a fellow heirs of the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Christianity, accurately

applied, fundamentally changed the value and status of women.

The Low Status of Women in Jesus' Day

Some feminists charge that Christianity, the Bible, and the Church are anti-female and horribly oppressive to women. Does God really hate women? Did the apostle Paul disrespect them in his New Testament writings? In this article we'll be looking at why Christianity is the best thing that ever happened to women, with insights from Alvin Schmidt's book *How Christianity Changed the World*.{1}



"What would be the status of women in the Western world today had Jesus Christ never entered the human arena? One way to answer this question," writes Dr. Schmidt, "is to look at the status of women in most present-day Islamic countries. Here women are still denied many rights that are available to men, and when they appear in public, they must be veiled. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women are even barred from driving an automobile. Whether in Saudi Arabia or in many other Arab countries where the Islamic religion is adhered to strongly, a man has the right to beat and sexually desert his wife, all with the full support of the Koran. . . .{2} This command is the polar opposite of what the New Testament says regarding a man's relationship with his wife. Paul told the Christians in Ephesus, 'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.' And he added, 'He who loves his wife loves himself.'"{3}

Jesus loved women and treated them with great respect and dignity. The New Testament's teaching on women developed His perspective even more. The value of women that permeates the New Testament isn't found in the Greco-Roman culture or the cultures of other societies.

In ancient Greece, a respectable woman was not allowed to leave the house unless she was accompanied by a trustworthy

male escort. A wife was not permitted to eat or interact with male guests in her husband's home; she had to retire to her woman's quarters. Men kept their wives under lock and key, and women had the social status of a slave. Girls were not allowed to go to school, and when they grew up they were not allowed to speak in public. Women were considered inferior to men. The Greek poets equated women with evil. Remember Pandora and her box? Woman was responsible for unleashing evil on the world.{4}

The status of Roman women was also very low. Roman law placed a wife under the absolute control of her husband, who had ownership of her and all her possessions. He could divorce her if she went out in public without a veil. A husband had the power of life and death over his wife, just as he did his children. As with the Greeks, women were not allowed to speak in public.{5}

Jewish women, as well, were barred from public speaking. The oral law prohibited women from reading the Torah out loud. Synagogue worship was segregated, with women never allowed to be heard.

Jesus and Women

Jesus' treatment of women was very different:

> *The extremely low status that the Greek, Roman, and Jewish woman had for centuries was radically affected by the appearance of Jesus Christ. His actions and teachings raised the status of women to new heights, often to the consternation and dismay of his friends and enemies. By word and deed, he went against the ancient, taken-for-granted beliefs and practices that defined woman as socially, intellectually, and spiritually inferior.*
>
> *The humane and respectful way Jesus treated and responded to the Samaritan woman [at the well] (recorded in John 4) may*

> *not appear unusual to readers in today's Western culture. Yet what he did was extremely unusual, even radical. He ignored the Jewish anti-Samaritan prejudices along with prevailing view that saw women as inferior beings.{6}*

He started a conversation with her—a Samaritan, a woman—in public. The rabbinic oral law was quite explicit: "He who talks with a woman [in public] brings evil upon himself." Another rabbinic teaching prominent in Jesus' day taught, "One is not so much as to greet a woman."{7} So we can understand why his disciples were amazed to find him talking to a woman in public. Can we even imagine how it must have stunned this woman for the Messiah to reach out to her and offer her living water for her thirsty soul?

Among Jesus' closest friends were Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who entertained him at their home. "Martha assumed the traditional female role of preparing a meal for Jesus, her guest, while her sister Mary did what only men would do, namely, learn from Jesus' teachings. Mary was the cultural deviant, but so was Jesus, because he violated the rabbinic law of his day [about speaking to women]."{8} By teaching Mary spiritual truths, he violated another rabbinic law, which said, "Let the words of the Law [Torah] be burned rather than taught to women. . . . If a man teaches his daughter the law, it is as though he taught her lechery."{9}

When Lazarus died, Jesus comforted Martha with this promise containing the heart of the Christian gospel: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26) These remarkable words were spoken to a woman! "To teach a woman was bad enough, but Jesus did more than that. He called for a verbal response from Martha. Once more, he went against the socioreligious custom by teaching a woman and by having her publicly respond to him, a man."{10}

“All three of the Synoptic Gospels note that women followed Jesus, a highly unusual phenomenon in first-century Palestine. . . . This behavior may not seem unusual today, but in Jesus’ day it was highly unusual. Scholars note that in the prevailing culture only prostitutes and women of very low repute would follow a man without a male escort.”{11} These women were not groupies; some of them provided financial support for Jesus and the apostles (Luke 8:3).

The first people Jesus chose to appear to after his resurrection were women; not only that, but he instructed them to tell his disciples that he was alive (Matt. 28, John 20). In a culture where a woman’s testimony was worthless because she was worthless, Jesus elevated the value of women beyond anything the world had seen.

Paul, Peter, and Women

Jesus gave women status and respect equal to men. Not only did he break with the anti-female culture of his era, but he set a standard for Christ-followers. Peter and Paul both rose to the challenge in what they wrote in the New Testament.

In a culture that feared the power of a woman’s external beauty and feminine influence, Peter encouraged women to see themselves as valuable because God saw them as valuable. His call to aspire to the inner beauty of a trusting and tranquil spirit is staggeringly counter-cultural. He writes, “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.”

Equally staggering is his call to men to elevate their wives with respect and understanding: “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with

respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” Consideration, respect, fellow heirs; these concepts sound good to us, but they were unheard of in the first century!

The apostle Paul is often accused of being a misogynist, one who hates and fears women. But Paul’s teachings on women reflect the creation order and high value God places on women as creatures made in his image. Paul’s commands for husbands and wives in Ephesians 5 provided a completely new way to look at marriage: as an earthbound illustration of the spiritual mystery of the union of Christ and His bride, the church. He calls wives to not only submit to their husbands as to the Lord, but he calls husbands to submit to Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). He calls men to love their wives in the self-sacrificing way Christ loves the church. In a culture where a wife was property, and a disrespected piece of property at that, Paul elevates women to a position of honor previously unknown in the world.

Paul also provided highly countercultural direction for the New Testament church. In the Jewish synagogue, women had no place and no voice in worship. In the pagan temples, the place of women was to serve as prostitutes. The church, on the other hand, was a place for women to pray and prophecy out loud (1 Cor. 11:5). The spiritual gifts—supernatural enablings to build God’s church—are given to women as well as men. Older women are commanded to teach younger ones. The invitation to women to participate in worship of Jesus was unthinkable—but true.

Misogyny in the Church

Author Dorothy Sayers, a friend of C.S. Lewis, wrote:

> *Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like*

> *this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious.*

She continues: "There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature."{12} And this is one of the unfortunate truths about Christianity we have to acknowledge: over the centuries, many Christ-followers have fallen far short of the standard Jesus set in showing the worth and dignity of women.

In the second century Clement of Alexandria believed and taught that every woman should blush because she is a woman. Tertullian, who lived about the same time, said, "You [Eve] are the devil's gateway. . . . You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die." Augustine, in the fourth century, believed that a woman's image of God was inferior to that of the man's.{13} And unfortunately it gets even nastier than that.

Some people mistakenly believe these contemptuous beliefs of the church fathers are rooted in an anti-female Bible, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. People held these misogynistic beliefs *in spite of,* not because of, the biblical teachings. Those who dishonor God by dishonoring His good creation of woman allow themselves to be shaped by the beliefs

of the surrounding pagan, anti-female culture instead of following Paul's exhortation to not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). The church in North America does the same thing today by allowing the secular culture to shape our thinking more than the Bible. Only nine percent of Americans claiming to be born-again have a biblical worldview.{14} The church in Africa and Asia does the same thing today by allowing animism, the traditional folk religion, to shape their thinking more than the Bible.

It's unfortunate that some of the church fathers did not allow the woman-honoring principles found in Scripture to change their unbiblical beliefs. But that is the failing of imperfect followers of Jesus, not a failure of God nor of His Word. Jesus loves women.

Effects of Christianity on Culture

As Christianity spread throughout the world, its redemptive effects elevated women and set them free in many ways. The Christian ethic declared equal worth and value for both men and women. Husbands were commanded to love their wives and not exasperate their children. These principles were in direct conflict with the Roman institution of *patria potestas,* which gave absolute power of life and death over a man's family, including his wife. When *patria potestas* was finally repealed by an emperor who was moved by high biblical standards, what a tremendous effect that had on the culture! Women were also granted basically the same control over their property as men, and, for the first time, mothers were allowed to be guardians of their children.{15}

The biblical view of husbands and wives as equal partners caused a sea change in marriage as well. Christian women started marrying later, and they married men of their own choosing. This eroded the ancient practice of men marrying child brides against their will, often as young as eleven or

twelve years old. The greater marital freedom that Christianity gave women eventually gained wide appeal. Today, a Western woman is not compelled to marry someone she does not want, nor can she legally be married as a child bride. But the practice continues in parts of the world where Christianity has little or no presence.{16}

Another effect of the salt and light of Christianity was its impact on the common practice of polygamy, which demeans women. Many men, including biblical heroes, have had multiple wives, but Jesus made clear this was never God's intention. Whenever he spoke about marriage, it was always in the context of monogamy. He said, "The two [not three or four] will become one flesh." As Christianity spread, God's intention of monogamous marriages became the norm.{17}

Two more cruel practices were abolished as Christianity gained influence. In some cultures, such as India, widows were burned alive on their husbands' funeral pyres. In China, the crippling practice of foot binding was intended to make women totter on their pointed, slender feet in a seductive manner. It was finally outlawed only about a hundred years ago.{18}

As a result of Jesus Christ and His teachings, women in much of the world today, especially in the West, enjoy more privileges and rights than at any other time in history. It takes only a cursory trip to an Arab nation or to a Third World country to see how little freedom women have in countries where Christianity has had little or no presence.{19} It's the best thing that ever happened to women.

Notes

1. Schmidt, Alvin. *How Christianity Changed the World*. Originally published under the title *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), which is the copy I reference in these notes.

2. “Men stand superior to women…. But those whose perverseness ye fear, admonish them and remove them into bedchambers and beat them; but if they submit to you then do not seek a way against them” Sura 4:34, as quoted in Schmidt, p. 97.

3. Schmidt, p. 97-98.

4. Ibid., p. 98-99.

5. Ibid., p. 101.

6. Ibid., p. 102-03.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p. 103-104.

10. Ibid., p. 104.

11. Ibid., p. 104-105.

12. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 47.

13. Schmidt, p. 109.

14. “A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person’s Life,” The Barna Research Group, Ltd. http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=154.

15. Ibid., p. 111.

16. Ibid., pp. 111-112.

17. Ibid., p. 115.

18. Ibid., pp. 118-119.

19. Ibid., p. 115.

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